Editorial

It’s an honor, it’s a privilege

*Physical Therapy in Sport* provides healthcare professionals with significant, relevant, and timely sports medicine and sports science research. The majority of participants of these studies are athletes or active individuals. But, there is another very important population who would benefit from our research efforts and the application of sports medicine research, military servicemen and women. Military service members must train daily to maintain their physical capabilities and mission readiness, which, unfortunately can result in musculoskeletal injury. In the United States this has resulted in thousands of musculoskeletal injuries that result in evacuation from theater, hospitalization, and lost duty time. Musculoskeletal injuries frequently result in short-term loss of function and can be the catalyst for long-term disability such as the development of osteoarthrosis that negatively affect the quality of life of the serviceman or woman. Research clinicians, such as physical therapists, are uniquely trained and qualified to conduct the type of research studies that determine the most effective physical training and rehabilitation protocols to prevent and mitigate the effects of injury.

At the University of Pittsburgh’s Warrior Human Performance Research Center housed within the Department of Sports Medicine and Nutrition, we’ve had the opportunity to conduct injury prevention and performance optimization research with the military since 2005. We’ve established on-base human performance research centers and shifted a significant amount of our time at our department’s research laboratory to these efforts. The objectives of our research are to minimize the number and severity of musculoskeletal injuries; maximize performance and tactical readiness; and enhance the career longevity and quality of life of the service member during and following service. The investigations include observation and testing during mission simulation and training; prospective analysis of risk factors for musculoskeletal injury; and the design and validation of physical training programs to induce favorable changes in risk factors for injury and measurable reductions in musculoskeletal injuries. The outcome of our research has had a significant and measurable impact on the personnel we’ve worked with. It has been rewarding, fulfilling, and likely will be the most memorable research experience I’ll have in my career. Our on-site faculty have had a significant impact on thousands of service members through individualized testing which provides each participant their injury prevention and performance training needs in comparison to injury risk and performance optimization benchmarks. These data inform them on how to fine tune their training so they can perform better and reduce their risk of injury. We brief military commanders on the results, discuss our research at professional meetings, and occasionally are interviewed by the media about our research involvement with the military. Frequently we are asked why we have shifted our focus and attention to these special populations from our traditional efforts working with university athletes and civilian active populations. There was a time that my answer was based on opportunity and funding, but now I find myself responding differently and more personally. The simple response is that it’s an honor and privilege to work with them and it provides a means by which I can support and serve such an important group of individuals.

The opportunities to conduct research helping military personnel are available to all. While the majority of our research has been on base with testing of military personnel, it doesn’t have to be exclusively so. Testing of similar populations at any research location with appropriate participants can be beneficial. The military represents a highly active population operating under demanding conditions. They suffer similar injuries to civilians participating in sport and leading active lifestyles. Consider one example, ankle injuries. They are one of the most common injuries across many sports including soccer, American football, and handball. Volumes of research and hundreds of researchers have examined the issues related to preventing these injuries, examining the effect of these injuries, and determining the best rehabilitation strategies to return individuals to their previous activity levels and sport. Ankle injuries in the military are also a significant concern. They may occur under different conditions, but the results of these injuries are identical and the focus of rehabilitation is the same. I encourage researchers to explore the literature pertaining to military populations and learn more about the sports medicine issues facing them, their commanders, and the individuals who care for them. Significant crossover between military personnel and civilian athletes exist and research exploring injury prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation are applicable to both populations. As research clinicians, we are uniquely qualified to conduct the type of sports medicine and sports science research that has application to military populations. I’m certain your exploration of research with application to our military servicemen and women will be rewarding, fulfilling, and appreciated.

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